

Meditation for Health and Happiness

What is meditation?

Meditation is a practice to relax and calm the mind and body. It uses the connection between a person's physical health and her/his mind or spirit. Meditation can be done in many different ways. All of these ways focus a person's awareness on the silence and stillness of the present moment to relax and calm the body and mind. University of Massachusetts professor Jon Kabat-Zinn says, "Meditation is simplicity itself. It's about stopping and being present. That is all." Father Thomas Keating adds that, "Meditation is for everyone, not just for monks."

What happens during meditation?

In meditation a person directs her/his attention toward a word, sound, image, prayer, or the breath, allowing the mind to settle into the present moment. The person becomes still and open to peace from within. It can be compared to a radio dial. Countless thoughts and feelings that preoccupy the mind each day are like static on a radio. Practicing meditation is like fine-tuning the radio dial. It can bring balance and harmony in the midst of continual change.

How can meditation increase health?

Meditation can be an important part of your health. Practicing meditation regularly can help calm your mind and body, which promotes healing. It can help a person meet challenges resulting from illness and long-term disease.

Has any research been done on meditation?

Many studies have shown the benefits of meditation. Several studies have shown that meditation training reduces anxiety and

increases positive emotions. Other studies have shown that a type of meditation (mindfulness) prevents recurrences of depression. Meditation has proven helpful for the treatment of tension headaches, a skin condition called psoriasis, several cardiac (heart) conditions (high blood pressure, coronary artery disease, and carotid atherosclerosis), high cholesterol, quitting smoking, and mental health disorders. It has also been found to be associated with an increased lifespan and improved thinking abilities of older individuals, less use of medical care, and reduced medical costs in the treatment of long-term pain. A 2004 meta-analysis (research that looks at the results of many studies) of a type of meditation called Mindfulness Based Stress Reduction (MBSR) found it useful for many long-term conditions such as depression, anxiety, fibromyalgia, cancer, coronary artery disease, chronic pain, obesity, and eating disorders. Other research suggests that meditation can lead to increased happiness, which in turn results in a stronger immune system and less illness; and that happiness can be learned, like any other skill, using meditation.

What is the connection between meditation and spirituality?

In addition to physical health benefits, meditation leads people to deeper levels of spiritual connection. These benefits can be healing and useful for any condition.

What are some recommendations for getting started?

- Find a quiet place to sit where you won't be disturbed. Ear plugs may be useful if it's noisy.

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- Set aside a certain amount of time to use only for meditation. A good intention to keep in mind before you start is, “I have nowhere to go and nothing to do. For this time now, I am nobody going nowhere.”
- Choose a way to signal the end of your meditation session. Some options to consider include: a timed cell phone vibration setting, an automated chime timer, a gentle knock on the door by someone who knows your meditation stop time, or a soothing grandfather clock or chime.
- Sit in a comfortable position that you can keep for up to 20 minutes. Your back and neck should be straight. (COMFORT being emphasized). Keep your chin parallel with the floor. Rest your hands in any comfortable position. For most people, sitting in a chair with feet flat on the floor is ideal. Other positions can include crossed legs, kneeling on a bench, or straddling a cushion. Most importantly, avoid straining and be comfortable yet alert!
- With eyes open or closed, allow your gaze to settle easily. In some traditions, such as Self-Realization Fellowship, one may also direct the gaze upward, concentrating on the point between the eyebrows.

Are there different kinds of meditation?

There are many different kinds of meditation. They are practiced throughout the world within different cultures and spiritual traditions. Two forms, Mindfulness Meditation and Centering Prayer, are described below. See the attached table if you want to learn about other forms.

What is mindfulness meditation?

- Mindfulness meditation (MM) is rooted in the East (China, India, Tibet) but it can be helpful to people everywhere. It is moment-by-moment focused awareness of the breath, body, mind, and environment.
- After settling comfortably as described above (for formal practice), allow the breath to flow

in and out easily, at a natural rate. Avoid forcing either a slower or faster rate. Just let your body breathe. Focus on the natural flow of the breath. Simply feel the body breathing, concentrating on the nostrils or the rising and falling belly. You will also note pauses between breaths, changes between breathing in and breathing out, and changes in how deep you breathe and the speed of the breaths. MM is moment-by-moment non-judgmental experience of being present with whatever is happening here and now.

- When your mind wanders into thoughts, memories, daydreams, images, ideas, worries, tasks, stories, body sensations, passions, or sounds, gently return to the breath. On recognizing your mind wandering, just note, “oh well” or “that’s interesting” and then go back to the breath. Be aware that this process has no beginning or end. Make NO judgment on whether you are “doing it right.” Let everything go. Returning over and over again to the breath is the process itself.
- When pain and discomfort arise, notice especially how the mind quickly reacts with restless thoughts and judgments. Simply note these and all other sensations but gently return to the breath. Let go of mental stories and expectations, whether painful or pleasurable, that come to your awareness.
- At the end of the formal MM period, sit comfortably for a minute or two. Stand up slowly when ready. Non-judgmentally make note of the experience.
- MM also includes moment-by-moment awareness of what is going on inside and outside of yourself throughout the day and is not limited to formal periods of sitting meditation.

What is centering prayer?

- Centering prayer (CP) comes from a Christian tradition. It aims to create a deep and personal connection with the Divine Indwelling through silence and stillness.



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CP emphasizes an ever-new heartfelt and open relationship with God, or the Beloved as described by St. Teresa of Avila.

- The method itself consists of making yourself available and open to the Beloved. CP uses a word that each individual chooses for her/himself called the Sacred Word (SW). The SW is simply a gesture of one's sincere intention to be present with the Beloved in silence while letting everything else go by.
- To begin, pick a one or two syllable word that has meaning to you, but which is not heavily charged with emotion. A neutral word may be *peace, love, yes, now, be, nature*, etc. A religious example might include *God, Abba, Yahweh, Mother, Beloved, Christ, Shalom*, etc. Mentally say the SW, focusing all your attention on the mental chanting of it. Your lips, mouth, and larynx (voicebox) should be still. The rate you mentally repeat your SW will vary. Sometimes it will be very fast, and other times you will have long silent pauses in-between each repeated SW. Let all other thoughts, sensations, and awareness fall away. When your mind wanders, simply re-introduce the SW mentally.
- Silently speak or will the SW, and mentally introduce it with gentleness as a way to return to deep personal communion with the Beloved after you temporarily are involved with some other thought or sensation. The SW is an effortless loving gesture you make in waiting upon the Beloved, an opening and surrendering of your whole being just as it is, without any comment or judgment.
- You will not use CP and the SW to push thoughts out of the mind. CP teaches a person not to resist any thought, not to hold on to a thought, not to comment mentally and not to react emotionally to any thought. You return ever-so-gently to the SW when you notice yourself thinking about something. Here, the emphasis is to avoid thinking about whatever arises. Let thoughts come, let them go. Return again and again to the SW as needed. This is simply to maintain the purity

of your intention to abide in the presence of the Beloved and to accept the mental state you may be in without judgment, resistance, or even bothering to notice or label any experience.

- The arising of uncomfortable experiences and their release through CP (by returning to the SW) is a healing process by which stored up emotional, mental, physical, and spiritual trauma is healed. Fr. Thomas Keating calls this process an unloading of emotional junk from the unconscious. Being available in this way allows you to be open to the ever-present, unconditional love of the Divine Indwelling. This healing action, born out of intentional silence and stillness, is the heart and soul of CP.
- In CP, a certain attentiveness arises, but it is general and vague, open and trusting, silent and peaceful. There are no desires except for the Beloved alone at this time. The only attention is to the general loving presence of the Divine as it arises.
- At the end of the formal CP period, sit comfortably for a minute or two. Stand up slowly when ready. Non-judgmentally make note of the experience.

What other suggestions can help my meditation practice?

- Create a quiet, private space for daily meditation.
- Meditate on an empty stomach. A full belly speeds up the digestive system drawing blood flow, energy, and focus away from the mind. This can make you feel sleepy.
- Do not meditate too long in the beginning. It's best if a beginner meditates more often for short periods of time. Emphasize quality over quantity.
- Stay with it and practice meditation on a regular basis. Progress comes through constant daily practice. In time try to meditate for 20 minutes in the morning just after rising and again before going to bed.

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- Try to approach every daily task and activity with the same degree of attention and presence as in meditation.
- Meditate with others regularly. Being in a group is enjoyable and may help you continue to practice. You may also notice greater energy when meditating with others.
- Choose a form of meditation that fits with your intuition, needs, beliefs, and faith.
- Find and meet with a meditation teacher on a regular basis.
- Some may come to focus less on their own desires and needs, and instead feel more love and compassion for others.
- There may be a deepening of spiritual life and religious experience.
- Through time and steady practice, you can release negative habits that involve grasping, desire, dislike, anger, and fear.
- Over time you can develop more peaceful experiences of oneness and connection for longer periods of time.

What can I expect?

- Keep in mind that having a goal to reach contradicts the intention and purpose of meditation, which is a continuous process of release and opening.
- The cultivation of inner resources and development is a daily life-long process. It is best supported with an attitude of honesty, patience, determination, and compassion. It is not “fast food” or immediate reward.
- In the beginning, it may be difficult to sit still for even five minutes. Gradually your mind will become more stable and clear.
- Some may experience an increased sense of freedom and the ability to make choices that are right for them, instead of feeling like passive victims.

The information in this handout is for general education. Please work with your health care practitioner to use this information in the best way possible to promote your health and happiness.

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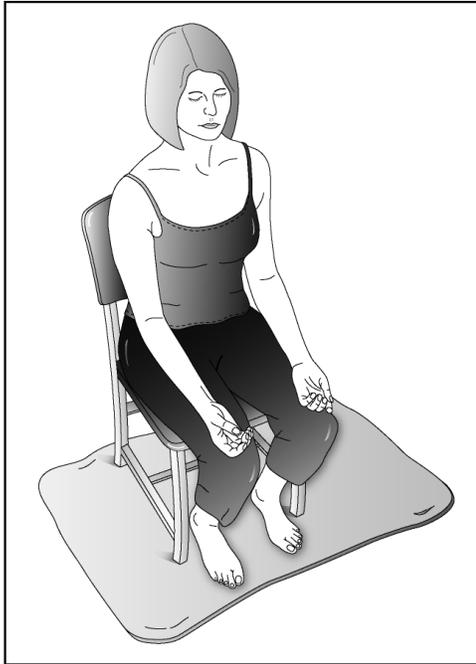
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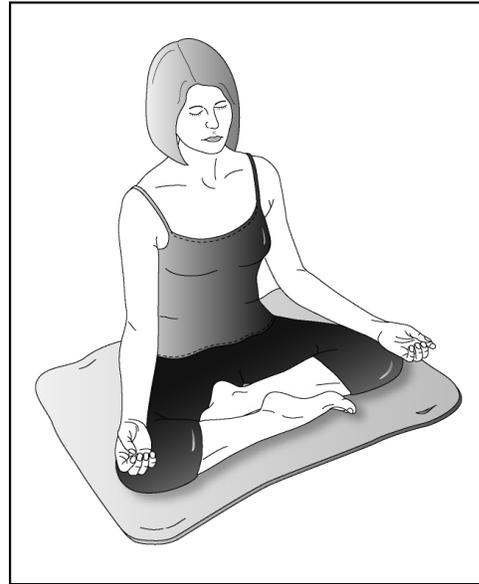
NOTES



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Seated position with chair. Maintain a straight back.



Cross-legged position. Maintain a straight back. Use of a cushion, shawl, mat, and /or blanket for comfort may be helpful.



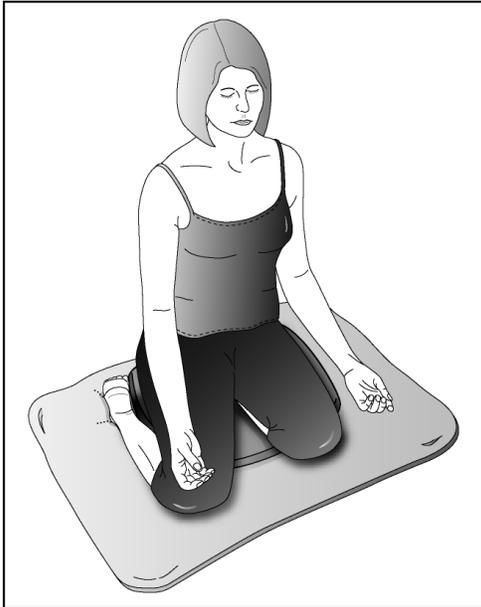
Half-Lotus position. Maintain a straight back. Use of a cushion, shawl, mat, and /or blanket for comfort may be helpful.



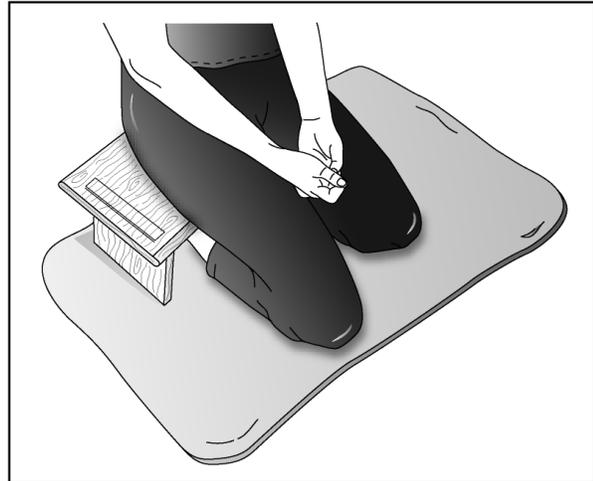
Full Lotus position. Maintain a straight back. Use of a cushion, shawl, mat, and /or blanket for comfort may be helpful.



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Kneeling position with cushion. Maintain a straight back. Use of a shawl, mat, and /or blanket for comfort may be helpful.



Kneeling position with bench. Maintain a straight back. Use of a shawl, mat, and /or blanket for comfort may be helpful.



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Meditation Systems Table (*table is representative and not exhaustive*)

| | Centering Prayer/ Contemplation | Kabbalah/ Qabalah | Mindfulness Meditation | Ridhwan School Diamond Approach | Self-Realization Fellowship (SRF) | Transcendental Meditation | Tibetan Buddhism | Zen Buddhism/ Ch'an |
|-----------------------------|---|---|--|---|--|---|---|---|
| Traditional background | Catholic/ Christian (inclusive) | Jewish Mystical (inclusive) | Vipassana/ Insight; MBSR Medical (inclusive) | Sufi Islam, mystical Psychology (inclusive) | Hindu Kriya Yoga (inclusive) | Vedic Hindu (inclusive) | Various Tibetan Lineages (inclusive) | Numerous Chinese & Japanese Lineages (inclusive) |
| Teachers | Thomas Keating; Thomas Merton; Cynthia Bourgeault; M. Basil Pennington; Wm. Meninger | Yehuda Ashlag; David Cooper; Michael Laitman | Jon Kabat-Zinn; Bhante Gunaratana; Sharon Salzberg; Jack Kornfield; Thich Nhat Hanh | A. H. Almaas (Hameed Ali) | Paramahansa Yogananda; Sri Daya Mata | Maharishi Mahesh Yogi (Various) | 14 th Dalai Lama; Panchen Lama; Chogyam Trungpa; 17 th Karmapa | Bodhidharma; Eisai; Dogan; Huang Po; Charlotte Joko Beck; Claude A. Thomas |
| Technique | Sacred Word; Prayer; Lectio Divina | Kabbalah | Breath/ Body awareness | Inquiry | Kriya Yoga; Hong-Sau; Aum; | Personalized Mantra | Mantra; Visualization; Chanting | Zazen |
| Body/ Activity focus | Contemplative walking | Self-directed | Mindful walking; Hatha Yoga; Body Scan | Breathing exercises | Energization exercises | Self-directed | Rlung-sgom walking; Mudras | Martial arts-Kungfu; Zen arts (ceramics, archery, calligraphy) |
| Readings/ Books | * <u>New Seeds of Contemplation</u> (by Merton); * <u>Open Mind Open Heart</u> (by Keating) | * <u>A Beginner's Guide to Kabbalah</u> (CD); * <u>A Heart of Stillness</u> (by Cooper) | * <u>Mindfulness in Plain English</u> (by Gunaratana) * <u>Full Catastrophe Living</u> (by JKZ); * <u>A Path with Heart</u> (by Kornfield) | * <u>Essence</u> ; * <u>The Diamond Heart Series I-IV</u> ; * <u>Inner Journey Home</u> (by Almaas) | * <u>Autobiography of a Yogi</u> ; *SRF Lessons (by Yogananda) | * <u>Science of Being & Art of Living- Transcendental Meditation</u> (by Maharishi) | * <u>The World of Tibetan Buddhism</u> ; * <u>Path to Bliss</u> (by Gyatso) * <u>Start Where You Are</u> (by Chodron) | * <u>Zen Mind Beginner's Mind</u> (by Suzuki); * <u>The Three Pillars of Zen</u> (by Kapleau) * <u>Everyday Zen</u> (by Beck) |
| Coursework | Retreats; Contemplative outreach | Tree of Life; Ten Sefirot; Devekut; Teacher directed | Mindfulness-based stress reduction / cognitive therapy (MBSR, MBCT) | Diamond approach lessons; Retreats | Mailed lessons; Retreats; Guru relationship; Interviews w/ monks | 7-step course work; Interviews; Personal mantra; Retreats | Teacher-student; Lineage directed | Teacher-student |
| Main Sites/ Headquarters | Gethsemani KY; Snowmass CO; Multiple/ Regional | Multiple | Insight Meditation Society MA; UMass for MBSR; Spirit Rock CA; Plum Village France; Multiple | Berkeley CA; Boulder CO; Multiple | Los Angeles CA; Multiple (See also Yogoda Satsanga Society of India, sister organization to SRF) | Fairfield, IA; Multiple; (Transcendental Meditation Independent UK) | Lhasa, Tibet; Dharamsala, India; Multiple | Shaolin Temple China (birthplace); Multiple Centers |

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|---------------------------|--|--|---|--|--|--|--|--|
| Websites/ Contact info | www.centeringprayer.com (Also see Christian Meditation, www.wccm.org) | www.kabbalah.info ; www.kabbalah.com ; 1-800-kabbalah | www.dharma.org ; http://w3.umassmed.edu/MBSR/public/searchmember.aspx ; www.eomega.org ; www.spiritrock.org ; www.plumvillage.org | www.ahalmaas.com ; www.ridhwan.org | http://www.yogananda-srf.org/ | www.tm.org ; www.maharishipeacepalace.org ; 1-888-learnTM; (www.tm-meditation.co.uk , independent, less \$) | www.deerparkcenter.org ; www.dawnmountain.org www.drikungtmc.org | www.dharmanet.org www.tricycle.com |
| Comments | Contemplation dates back to St. Anthony and the Desert Fathers, revived after Vatican II. In the tradition of Christian saints and mystics. | Ancient oral tradition of wisdom and mystery; tells of Light of Creation; Jewish renewal movement | Popularized in 1980's from 8 week course in medical/ research setting; many vipassana/ insight sanghas or groups | Founded in 1970's; called the "Work", draws from psychology & integrates spiritual approach to Self-liberation | Founded in 1920; popularized yoga-meditation in U.S.; teaches direct path to Self-realization through ancient Kriya Yoga | Popularized in 1960's, expanded meditation in U.S. Large corpus of health research at Maharishi Vedic University | Model of non-violence loving compassion of sentient beings; ongoing dialogue with neuroscience researchers | Chinese/Japanese tradition arrived in U.S. after WWII; most Zen meditation research in Japanese |

Other popular meditation styles, teachers, and spiritual practices:

- Ram Dass, formerly a Harvard psychologist and researcher, learned Hindu meditation and chanting from his guru Maharaji. Books: *Be Here Now* and *Still Here*. Website: www.ramdasstapes.org
- Eckhart Tolle, formerly an Oxford research scholar, experienced a spiritual transformation and teaches contemporary spirituality. Book: *The Power of Now*. Website: www.eckharttolle.com
- Tom Brown Jr. was mentored by "Grandfather," an Apache Medicine Man and Scout. Book: *The Vision*. School: Nature and Wilderness Survival Schools. Website: www.trackerschool.com
- Ken Wilber, unified field theory of consciousness. Book: *A Brief History of Everything*. School: Integral Institute. Websites: www.kenwilber.com, www.integralinstitute.org, <http://wilber.shambhala.com>
- John Main, a Catholic monk, founder of Christian Meditation in-breath mental mantra "MA-RA" and out-breath "NA-THA" Sanskrit for "Come Lord Jesus." Book: *Word into Silence*. Website www.wccm.org